

MINUTES OF THE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 11 September 2024 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Jacq Paschoud (Chair), Susan Wise (Vice-Chair), James-J Walsh, Aisha Malik-Smith, Sakina Sheikh and Luke Warner

ALSO PRESENT: Emma Campbell Smith (Head of Governance and Committee Services), Councillor Amanda De Ryk and Councillor John Paschoud

IN ATTENDANCE VIRTUALLY: Jeremy Chambers (Director of Law and Corporate Governance), Jamie Baker (Head of Electoral Services)

1. Minutes

This being the first meeting of the Governance Committee since its constitution, the Head of Governance and Committee Services opened the meeting and invited nominations for Chair.

It was moved by Cllr Sheikh, seconded by Cllr Warner and RESOLVED to elect Cllr Jacq Paschoud to the Chair.

The Chair invited nominations for Vice Chair. It was moved by Cllr Aliya Sheikh, seconded by Cllr Warner and RESOLVED to elect Cllr Susan Wise as Vice Chair.

The Chair noted that Cllrs John Paschoud and Amanda De Ryk were also in attendance.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the final meeting of the Constitution Working Party (CWP) held on 14 March 2023 be confirmed and signed by the Governance Committee as the successor to the CWP.

2. Declarations of Interest

None.

3. Update from the Monitoring Officer

The Monitoring Officer (MO), who was in attendance virtually, gave a spoken update of planned work on the constitution as follows, most of which would come to the next meeting:

- Tidy up of the Scheme of Delegation to reflect the council structure following Lewisham Homes coming in house. Some of this work had been done but the fine details needed to be worked through;
- Include a senior officer structure chart;

- Work to make the constitution more user friendly. This would not involve changing the provisions, but making the document easier to navigate and use;
- Review the remaining Council, Executive and Committee procedure rules. Around a third of procedure rules had already been reviewed;
- Substitutions ;
- Deputations – there was currently a single reference to deputations in the constitution but with no details on what they are or how the council would handle them;
- Outside Bodies – ensuring this is up to date and fit for purpose
- Refining the referrals process; and
- Appending the scrutiny/Executive protocol and referencing it in the procedure rules.

The MO reassured the committee that the Task and Finish Group on Scrutiny would report to Mayor and Cabinet, who would respond in the usual way, however any resulting constitutional changes would have to come to the Governance Committee for agreement and recommendation to Council.

A discussion followed in which the following was noted:

- Some Members supported the introduction of substitutions, believing that they helped knowledge sharing as well as achieving quorum;
- A full written report would be available for the next meeting;
- One Member called for a review of whether council questions should be allowed during any pre-election publicity period, noting that some questioners had asked political questions to which the Cabinet Members could not give a political response.
- Many authorities have constitutional provisions that do not allow motions, public or member questions during pre-election periods.
- The MO agreed to review of the constitutional changes made in the previous phase.

4. Elections update

The Head of Electoral Services gave a brief overview of the 2024 elections as follows:

- The 20th annual Young Mayor election took place in February. The election delivery cost had been reduced by £10,000 over the last 3 years, by using pupils as polling staff and by promoting online engagement, including social media platforms such as Tiktok.
- Also in February was the Lee Green Neighbourhood Planning Referendum - a cross-borough election with Greenwich.
- 7 March Lewisham mayoral election
- 2 May GLA and Deptford by election. This was a constituency level count with Greenwich.

- 4 July parliamentary election and by election in Blackheath.

The Committee heard that:

- The new Returning Officer had brought a fresh perspective and had made changes to the count, resulting in a slightly longer count time but allowing greater confidence in the result.
- The delivery cost of elections was increasing due to rising cost of postage, printing, staffing, polling station venue hire. In some cases, venue hire charges had increased to 2 or 3 times the pre-pandemic cost.
- The team was currently working on a review of EU voters. Of the approximately 20,000 such voters in Lewisham, around 15,000 had automatic rights and the remainder needed to be reviewed.
- The annual canvas had started a fortnight prior to the meeting, beginning with online, and to be followed by door knocking in October. Around 40% of properties had already responded online by the time of the meeting.
- The review of polling districts was about to commence. This was a statutory process which involved looking at the polling stations in borough, consulting on them, reporting back to the Governance Committee for a recommendation to Council in January.

In response to questions from the Committee it was noted:

- Compared with 0.08% nationally of people who were turned away for not having ID, the figure in Lewisham was around 0.12%. Some London authorities were yet to publish their statistics so an accurate local comparison was not possible.
- Some authorities had problems collecting the data, and therefore the figures were not reliable. Lewisham had used the March election as a practice so had achieved a high level of compliance with polling stations completing the form accurately.
- The lowest turnout had been in Bellingham ward, which had been a trend for a number of elections. Turnout had also been comparatively low in Downham, Rushey Green, Evelyn, Deptford.
 - **ACTION:** Head of Electoral Services to look at turnout side by side with deletion and registration statistics to see whether there was a correlation between turnout and register mobility.
- Where voters had presented without ID, polling station staff encouraged them to return with ID. Return rates varied, likely due to the approach and manner of polling station staff.
- The online canvas saves 50p per return. The previous year's canvas had seen a record number of online returns – around half of the properties in the borough had replied online.
- Anecdotally it seemed to be older, poorer residents who did not present or return with voter ID. However, no data could be recorded about voters so this was merely an observation.
- Polling locations – there had been a low percentage change between elections where polling stations had changed location but it was difficult to accurately compare since the turnout differed greatly between, for example, a local by election compared to a parliamentary election.
- One Member suggested running the Young Mayor election entirely online to reduce costs further.

- Other cost saving steps that the service was taking included piggy backing on the council tax letter to avoid duplicate postage costs, better targeting of communications. Members suggested adding clauses into the leases of community assets granting the council the right to use the venue at no cost for elections.
- Members also asked that “I have voted” stickers be trialled as a way of encouraging voter turnout.
 - **ACTION:** Head of Electoral Services to consider stickers
- According to the Electoral Commission recorded statistics, around 4% of those who didn’t vote cited voter ID as the reason.
- While it may be possible to look at distance from polling station to see whether there was a correlation between distance from station and propensity to vote, the reality was that availability of suitable venues was a significant challenge
- Some Members felt that the Young Mayors election should resemble as closely as possible a normal election as an education tool in how to vote.
- More outreach with residents with disabilities was planned before the 2026 election, including a mock election with adults with disabilities
- Lewisham received 694 applications for Voter Acceptance Certificates (VAC) across the 3 elections, with 159 having been recorded as used in the parliamentary election. This discrepancy suggested that polling staff recording of VAC presentation needed improvement.

Members thanked the Head of Electoral Services for his hard work in successfully delivering the various elections this year.

The meeting ended at 20.23pm